Original Article

Title: Reflections on the psychoanalysis of hope

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Abstract

What does psychoanalysis tell us about hope? This paper addresses the sense of belief one has in the value of the future, with particular reference to the work of Michael Balint and D.W. Winnicott. In particular, the author elaborates on Balint's 'new beginning' and Winnicott's 'moment of hope' as the theoretical bases for a psychoanalysis of hope. The positive evaluation of hope is set out alongside the interpretation of hope from the standpoint of narcissistic omnipotence. Hope is defined positively, in the first part of the paper, as *the doing of a certain kind of action*, and, in the second part of the paper, the author explores this claim in more depth through a close reading of Anne Enright's novel, *The Green Road*. The novel is presented as a fictional representation (or literary enactment) of the inner future, where the protagonist becomes hopeful in the event of waiting.

Keywords: Balint; defiance; inner future; new beginning; waiting; vital and devitalised uses of hope; Winnicott

…the pages of the sea

are a book left open by an absent master

in the middle of another life –

I begin here again.

Derek Walcott: *Another Life* (1973, Part One, p. 145)

In Weber's influential reconstruction of European modernity, the ideal of individual autonomy is undercut by inauspicious institutional and cultural conditions. The negative attitude of Puritanism, directed ostensibly at the scourge of sentimental illusion and idolatrous superstition in the religious life, constitutes 'one of the roots' of our 'disenchantment' in the form of 'disillusioned and pessimistically inclined individualism' (Weber, 1930, p. 105). How does this account measure up to the state in which we currently find ourselves? As the culture of value narrows into an increasingly virulent opposition between religious fundamentalism and new formations of populist reaction, the crisis of the political moment reveals the extent to which the question of 'disenchantment' has become more and not less urgent under the conditions of late modernity.

How should one proceed, then, in a cultural context that has elevated intolerance to the level of an ideal on the one hand and, on the other, put an end to the naïve acknowledgement of the transcendent? Charles Taylor (2007) has taken up this question in terms of 'exclusive humanism' and the historical conditions of belief. I want to raise a different but related question concerning our belief in the value of the future. I take it that the task of re-valuation is at once ethical and political, that it extends its reach into our moral, social and spiritual lives. Weber persisted, in his more positive evaluation of modern culture, with the idea of 'personality' and its

intrinsic relation to certain fundamental values and meanings. However, given that sociology can get us only so far with the evaluation of ourselves, my question is whether psychoanalysis has anything more positive to offer.

At first glance, things don't look particularly auspicious. The Freudian interpretation is actually part of the problem, to the extent that Freud (1933 [1932]/1964) turned 'disenchantment' to his own advantage by pitting truth-claims against wishes as the basis of his scientific worldview (pp. 158-182). We aren't well served by the Freudian epistemology of demystification, which, as Ricoeur (1970) points out, is aimed at our wishful impulses and illusions, rather than error or immorality (p. 26 *et passim*). One might be discouraged from pursuing the matter any further due to the implicit identification of hope, illusion and wish-fulfilment (*Wunscherfüllung*) in Freudian metapsychology, coupled with the thinly scattered references to hope in contemporary psychoanalysis (Mitchell, 1993, p. 261, n4). This, I think, would be an overhasty reaction. I believe there are significant gains to be made in persisting with the question of what psychoanalysis may be able to tell us about hope – understood as *the doing of a certain kind of action*. In fact, pushing on with the question of hope is indicative of what I mean to say about the nature of hope.

My starting point is that we don't need yet more psychoanalytical explanations of illusion so much as a viable psychoanalysis of hope. While the construction of the latter lies well beyond the purview of a single contribution, I mean to advance our understanding of hope in terms of three related arguments. Firstly, I argue that the object is most vital in its potentiality; that we are enlivened above all by what we hope to find in life; and that the object which is yet to be found exceeds anything we might find. Secondly, assuming that hope involves intrinsic reference to action, I link the vitality of the object *in potentia* (*in posse* but not *in esse*) to the constitutive nature of

hope, understood primarily as an act of waiting. Thirdly, I contend that we don't wait simply because we feel hopeful, but rather that we gain in hopefulness because we wait. Taken together, these arguments support my basic claim that hope performs a commitment to the 'envisaged future' (Loewald, 1962/1980, p. 46).

Anne Enright's (2015) novel, *The Green Road*, provides a powerful fictional representation of hope and futurity, precisely where the protagonist becomes hopeful, somehow or other, in the event of waiting. On the one hand, the narrative foregrounds the theme of hope as *a manner of doing something*, as well as a problem of inner reality. On the other, the novel is structured as a literary enactment of hope in terms of leave-taking and homecoming, which, in the context of the European imagination, evokes the deeply ingrained Homeric pattern of return and recognition. In the second half of the paper, I offer an extended reading of Enright's novel along these lines. But, to begin with, I outline what seems to me a viable framework for thinking about hope by drawing on the work of Michael Balint and Donald Winnicott. In what amounts to a critical rereading of two pre-eminent figures in the Independent tradition of English psychoanalysis, I approach Balint and Winnicott partly through a Derridean lens.

Primary love

Balint didn't address the question of hope as such; nonetheless, I think his emphasis on what is expected from the object advances our understanding of waiting on two counts – first, as an irreducible combination of regression and reclamation; and second, as a beginning that does not cease to be one. For Balint (1930/1985), a new beginning presupposes 'a regression to the most primitive form of life', which, unlike a pathological organisation, is useful to the extent that it includes 'the hope of a new opportunity' (p. 39). The regressed patient relies on an unconscious sense of hope, or

an expectation that the object will 'respond in a manner reminiscent of primary substances' (1968/2003, p. 148). The expectation is excessive, and as such involves the reclamation of somatic memories of abundance and 'primary object-love'.

If we take Balint's 'new beginning' to its logical conclusion, we can see that the act of hope is implicitly retroactive, as well as explicitly forward-looking. *Après-coup* and *avant-coup* operate in tandem, consciously and unconsciously, as a twofold inscription of psychic temporality and intersubjective arousal. On this reading, regression opens the inner future, or the future-to-come, in and through the reclamation of a pre-ontological gift of love. The idea of the gift is central for Balint and Winnicott alike. The retrospective-prospective structure of waiting, without which the 'origin' would not have been able to take place, structures hopefulness in relation to an inaugural gift of love, what Balint calls 'primary love'.

Waiting thus opens the possibility of the impossible in terms of 'a gift that cannot make itself (a) present [*un don qui ne peut pas se faire présent*]' (Derrida, 1992a, p. 29). Everything has to begin again, as if for the first time, on the primordial grounds of love and hope. As such, the new beginning operates at the interface of primary love and infinite hope – that is, according to 'the measureless measure [*mesure sans mesure*] of the impossible' (p. 29). Experienced in the therapeutic movement of regression-reclamation as the possibility of the impossible, Balint's 'new beginning' is another name for time as such (Derrida, 1968/1982, p. 55).

Life is 'continually making this new beginning' (Balint, 1930/1985, p. 37) by looking forward to what is to come and backward to a beginning. The beginning carries within it a power of new beginning, which is not a once and for all event, but is enacted repeatedly, so that successive generations may participate in what Balint called the 'potential immortality' of life (p. 38). The latter renders hope infinite with

respect to the eternal recurrence of 'archaic' object-love: far from eroding the foundation of hope, waiting is a way of keeping hope alive, as well as extending its reach, on the primordial grounds of love. The opposition of 'time' and 'eternity' is, therefore, undercut by a 'beginning' that does not cease to be one. As Balint defined it, the new beginning is implied by the beginning, and the 'essential iterability' (Derrida, 1971/1982, p. 317) of the beginning means that it remains separable from itself, an impossible possible manifest as the interminability of hope.

Narcissism and hope

I think Balint's notion of a 'new beginning' is indispensable for the psychoanalysis of hope. Winnicott (1954/1978) developed a comparable line of thinking by differentiating an 'organized regression' (momentary or long-lasting) from 'pathological withdrawal' (p. 283). Winnicott's account of 'the patient's expectations that belong to the need to regress' (p. 293) confirms Balint's fundamental insight that an organised regression makes a new beginning possible. In light of Mitchell's (1993) comparative reading of Balint and Winnicott on the one hand and, on the other, of the American analyst Harold Boris, there seems to be no disagreement on the fundamental point that desire is appetitive and urgent in nature, whereas hope is essentially possessive and potential. Beyond this point, however, Balint and Winnicott part company with Boris in significant and profound ways.

The divergence is particularly evident when it comes to thinking about the usefulness of hope in human life. Basically, Boris (1976) elaborates a post-Kleinian perspective on the 'fundamental antagonism' (p. 144) between desire and hope. Drawing on Bion and the idea of a pre-conception searching for and coupling with a particular realisation, Boris advances the thesis that hope arises from pre-conceptions

of how the world 'should be' (p. 144). Focusing on what he sees as the inherent divergence in human experience between 'ought' and 'is', Boris argues that hope comes into existence as separate from the instinctual drives, upon which it remains a fetter.

The argument seems valid to me insofar as it addresses what we might call a perverse form of optimism, by which I mean a secret wish that nothing will ever come of waiting. This is not the same as someone believing that nothing *good* will come of their situation and, therefore, sinking into a passive state of resignation. Rather, appropriated for either perverse or self-destructive ends, hope becomes an *active* form of devitalisation, which Green (2005) describes as an activity of 'negative narcissism' (p. 121). The perverse temptation to love waiting for its own sake, and to identify with 'hope' as a type of devitalised illusion, is evident in Kafka's story 'Before the Law' (1919/1978). In this case, the man from the country sits before the gateway to the Law, arrested in the narcissism of his own claim. Freud (1930/1961) in turn alerted us to the danger of 'killing off the instincts' in the narcissistic act of waiting (p. 79). In this case, hope sacrifices life for the 'happiness of quietness'. Similarly, Klein (1963/1980) insisted that, while there may be 'other sources of hopefulness which derive from the strength of the ego and from trust in oneself and others, an element of omnipotence is always part of it' (p. 305).

Desire takes on any number of guises for those enthralled by the law and, in this respect, there is much to be said for the Freudian-Kleinian analysis of destructive narcissism and the devitalised uses of hope. I don't doubt that patients whose lives are given to waiting run the risk of turning hope into omnipotent disavowal. Clearly, these patients court an extreme idealisation of themselves that is 'symmetrical with that of the hoped-for object' (Potamianou, 1997, p. 83). As analysts, we will be

familiar with the corrosive aspects of postponement in our clinical work. Boris, however, tends to identify hope itself with the ceaselessly postponed life. On this reckoning, life is brought to a standstill through the 'glamour' of narcissism and its omnipotent claim on reality. Consequently, the aim of analysis involves the augmentation of desire and the revocation of hope. With patients for whom hope is reckoned to be the matter, analysis is aimed at calling hope back from its various investments and enactments. This involves what Klein (1963/1980) described as 'a diminished capacity for hope', if not an annulment of the infantile illusion of hope as such (p. 304).

The value of defiance

The concept of negative narcissism is useful in certain cases, but I don't think it provides a comprehensive account of hopeful waiting. As the second of our two main sources for the psychoanalysis of hope, Winnicott allows us to link the envisaged future with the notion of *defiance*. I take it that, while defiance may act as a 'psychic refuge' (Kohon, 2016, p. 25), it doesn't necessarily involve an organised 'psychic retreat' (Steiner, 1993). On the contrary, in the case of the deprived child, the value of the defiant gesture is evident as an unconscious expression of hope, a hope that holds up 'over a period of time' (Winnicott, 1954-5/1978, p. 264). We can infer from this that the infant has had an experience of goodness prior to the development of the depressive position. Accordingly, Winnicott (1963c/1986) viewed depression as an achievement of relative dependence, which, not unlike Balint's beginning, 'has within itself the germ of recovery' (p. 72). By contrast, Winnicott (1954-5/1978) associated 'depressions that are encountered clinically in psychiatry…with depersonalization, or *hopelessness* in respect of object relationships' (pp. 271-2, emphasis added).

For Winnicott, defiance and depression alike have value and, in my view, their positive evaluation may be applied more generally to hope as we know it across the normal range of human experience. In this respect, the idea of antisocial symptoms as signs of hope was a major theme of the 'second phase' of Winnicott's work from 1945 to 1959 (Abram, 2008). It wasn't until his late paper on object-use, however, that he formulated a sufficiently coherent account of the spontaneous violence of life – that is, with respect to the infant's early destructive feelings towards his mother. The notion of 'destruction' itself undergoes a re-valuation in Winnicott's clinical thinking. In order to formulate a genuinely comprehensive psychoanalysis of hope, I propose that we bring together these two sets of ideas from different periods in Winnicott's work.

The combined perspective of defiance and object-usage will allow us to re-evaluate the 'principle of hope' (Bloch, 1995) as a transcendent principle of life, in conjunction with a destructive first principle. Starting with defiance and the moment of hope, Winnicott (1963a/1985) describes how hopefulness follows 'a break in the continuity of the environmental provision' (p. 104). The 'break' refers to the way in which the primordial sense of possession, the very groundwork of hope, has been impinged against. If we think of deprivation in these terms as a separation trauma, things are nonetheless hopeful to the extent that the child experiences the pain of deprivation against the background of goodness in the earliest relationship. Life comes to a standstill not on account of omnipotence and the perversion of optimism, or in terms of the devitalised use of hope, but rather between the underlying conviction that 'something is available' and the unconscious assumption that 'something is missing'. Indeed, far from the abrogation of hope and the attendant fantasies of subjective omnipotence, Winnicott credits the unconscious assumption of hope in the child's defiant gesture: 'a manifestation of the antisocial tendency in a child means that there

has developed in the child some hopefulness; hope that a way may be found across a gap' (pp. 103-4).

What part does the 'gap' play in the achievement of defiance? I think we need to revise Winnicott's account in order to allow for the gap as a means of articulating *après-coup* and *avant-coup*. In drawing our attention to the thwarted developmental process that lies behind the child's antisocial behaviour, Winnicott reduces the moment of hope to a reactive reach for life. The gap is seen as no more than an obstacle between two contrasting manifestations of the object-world – namely, the missing object and the available object. Alternatively, I suggest we see the gap as a potential space in its own right; in fact, I would go further and claim that, under certain psychic conditions, the reach for life takes place in the gap. For me, the gap frames the possibility of hopeful waiting, and as such may be seen as a function of the new beginning. Moreover, by substituting 'defiance' for 'delinquency' (Winnicott doesn't use the word 'defiance'), we shift the emphasis from reactive to active types of waiting. The gap thus becomes integral to the act of hope.

Essentially, my argument is that the gap provides an opening for the affirmation of hope. I shall come back to this at length in my reading of Enright's novel. Meanwhile, the following examples will give us some idea of what is at stake. Beckett (1983), whose entire body of work may be seen as an interminable new beginning, retained a sense of hope in relation to failure: 'Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better' (p. 7). Beckett nowhere lays claim to the last word; even at the end, so to speak, the work of failure takes places within the gap (between times), rather than in spite of it. In Beckett's work, hope remains alongside failure in the interval that simultaneously breaks in upon being and holds open the possibility of living on. We are left in no doubt, by this incomparably stark body of work, that the possibility of failure remains active

throughout – that is, 'as the trace of an impossibility, at times its memory and always its haunting' (Derrida, 1998/2002, p. 362). While an exegesis of Beckett isn't our topic here, I think his work offers a further resource for a general theory of hope; most importantly, as the pre-eminent figure in a tradition of post-war European literature that remains bleakly hopeful, Beckett doesn't confuse hope with the expression of a wish.

Similarly, in *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*, Alan Sillitoe (1959/2007) presents the character of Colin Smith as a defiant voice from the margins of society. In Sillitoe's (short) story, Smith, who thinks of himself as 'the first and last man…*both at once*' (p. 8; emphasis added), suffers the pain of deprivation, emotional and material, through 'the loneliness of the long-distance runner running across country' (p. 43). Formally irreconcilable, Sillitoe and Beckett are nonetheless centrally concerned with the severity of survival, the defiant impulse to overtake the chronic sense of withdrawal and isolation with negative passion. In a story backed by the exemplary defiance of the Lawrentian imagination, Sillitoe renders the scourging loneliness of Smith as a palpable claim on violence as well as hope. The two hours' long-distance running, three mornings a week, that Smith manages to wangle out of his jailers enables him to keep alive his primitive feelings of hope on the one hand and, on the other, to clarify his thoughts on class war.

'Losing to win' is the trivial aspect of Sillitoe's story, one of the clichés of the genre and, no doubt, the reason for its popular success. On the other hand, Smith's effort to make something of himself beyond the superficial esteem of his jailers lies deeper in the very rhythm of the narrative. As with Beckett's oddly defiant figures, Sillitoe's long-distance runner writes and thinks in tandem with his breathing. Should we think of breathing itself as hopeful? Beckett (1970/1984) distils the rhythmic injunction of narrative, typically paring things back to no more than a moment or two of alternating

cries and breathing. Sillitoe (1959/2007) describes the same elemental situation, albeit by different means. Half-way through his morning run, and sliding down a steep bank against 'a phlegmy bit of sunlight', Smith experiences a conscious sense of wonder, and, I suggest, an unconscious moment of hope in the midst of estrangement and solitude: 'It's the most wonderful minute because there's not one thought or word or picture of anything in my head while I'm down there. I'm empty, as empty as I was before I was born' (p. 19). The hope expressed in this gratuitous moment suggests a need to go back and relive a pre-primitive, if not pre-natal sense of emptiness, and thereby to experience for the first time an interval, so to speak, before the world began. Together with the permeable boundaries of breathing and thinking, the merged acts of running and writing ('scribbling') provide a kind of self-holding as a defence against the feeling of being empty *of* oneself, rather than in oneself (Balint, 1963/1993).

These immemorial feelings of hope, lining an otherwise unbearable inner void, are inextricably linked, emotionally and historically, to aggressive impulses and thoughts of war: 'by sending me to Borstal they've shown me the knife, and from now on I know something I didn't know before: that it's a war between me and them' (Sillitoe, 1959/2007, p. 16). Sillitoe's estranged solitary – 'me' rather than 'us' – cannot lay claim to an articulate political stance; the conscienceless violence of defiance doesn't amount to a coherent resistance. Nevertheless, the evocation of the State's war against its own citizens, set out in the literary context of the mid-century English working-class novel, takes us beyond anything that Winnicott said about deprivation. Most importantly, the pivotal role of the father in these novels sets this post-war culture of value at an irrevocable distance from the Winnicottian tradition in English psychoanalysis. In Sillitoe's story, hope announces the availability of pain as suffering through the defiant spirit of the teenager's emasculated father. More than a reaction to the loss of *this* or *that*

object, the boy inherits this 'skin and stick' image of paternal defiance as a violent, aggressive response to the deprived life.

The gift of life

Sillitoe's (1959/2007) juvenile delinquent embodies the fundamental intuition that '[e]verything's dead, but good, because it's dead before coming alive, not dead after being alive' (p. 11). There is a pristine quality to life in this intuition of the not-yet-conceived (Bloch, 1995) which recalls the image of Blakean innocence, an image of primary affection combined with the possibility of *potentia* (Thompson, 1993, p. 170). The combined perspective of affectivity and potentiality (Henry, 1993) allows for two further possibilities – first, that deprivation and pain constitute an essential disruption in the vital order of things; and second, that hope represents a primordial expectation in the reach for life.

Winnicott lends weight to this view of life only in his late work. Most importantly, the central and original contribution of his paper on object-use, in which he set out his final views on destructiveness arising from love, concerns the 'intermediate position' between object-relating and object-use. There is certainly no doubt here about the fecundity of the gap, or the intermediate state of life on the threshold of being. As an integral part of inner reality, the endemic violence of the gap is comparable to the work of the truest and deepest self in Ted Hughes' sense. Winnicott couldn't possibly hope to match the scope of Hughes's re-valuation of violence and his rendering of inwardness. The images in *Crow*, for example, may be seen as expressions of inner violence, but also 'metaphors of "breakthrough"' into self-knowledge (Bate, 2015, p. 291). Nevertheless, Winnicott's (1954-5/1978) account of the destructive element is quite different from anything in either Freud or Klein – that is, where the appearance of ruthless cannibalistic

attacks on the part of the infant are understood partly in terms of 'physical behaviour', and partly as 'a matter of the infant's own imaginative elaboration of the physical function' (p. 268).

In a world alive with violent infantile passions, Winnicott (1971/1974) posits an early developmental process in which the infant actually destroys his mother as a real external object, rather than a fantasised object of destruction, destroying her sense of herself as a good enough mother (p. 90; see also Ogden, 2016, p. 1247). The idea of hope is cast in a new light by the formulation of primitive violence and destructiveness in these unsparing and vital terms: hopefulness is discernible in its uses, where usefulness depends on the destruction-survival of the object (a mother who survives).

Here, as elsewhere, the comparison between Winnicott and Klein is instructive. Among the not infrequent references to hope in her own work, Klein (1952/1980) describes it as 'one of the factors which help the infant to overcome the depressive position' (p. 75, n1). When the depressive position is at its height in the transference, according to Klein (1957/1980), the patient's insight into his or her own envy and destructiveness gives rise not only to 'pain and guilt', but also to 'feelings of relief and hope' (p. 196). Klein didn't intend the positive evaluation of hope to go beyond a certain limit; by contrast, Winnicott credits the constitutive nature of hope. He lets us see the extent to which the infant becomes hopeful through the hopes his mother has for him, even before the beginning. Winnicott (1952/1978) also surprised himself in coming up with the thought that 'there is no such thing as a baby', going on to clarify that 'if you show me a baby you certainly show me also someone caring for the baby' (p. 99).

It seems to me that, in clarifying his 'alarm' at the appearance of this idea, Winnicott didn't work out its more radical implication that 'there is someone, some other'. As such, he left us with more to say about the 'mother who survives' (1954-

5/1978, p. 270), particularly in relation to the formation of hope. The act of hope is tied up with the infant's own 'gift gesture', but it also presupposes an act of devotion on the mother's part. Again, Derrida (1992b) allows us to extend the scope of Winnicott's thinking: the 'singular anachrony' that characterises the 'moment of hope' applies not only to the infant, but also to the mother and her indebtedness to the law of the gift (p. 299). The immemorial somatic traces of hope are interiorised, retrospectively, as a gift. As such, the pre-object mother makes available the hopes she had for the child. The gift, in this case, isn't subsumed by the mother's desire for the father; the realisation of hope isn't confined to an Oedipus-type narrative. On the contrary, the oedipal schema is overdetermined by a general economy of indebtedness. An infant who hasn't been given time to begin with, whose mother doesn't survive the onslaught of ruthless love, has no grounds for hope, nor any reliable means of access to the symbolic order. On the other hand, where a findable object has been given as *a future possibility* on the pre-primitive, pre-ontological grounds of primary love, the infant's reach for life is confirmed and he is now able to make a gift gesture of his own. The father and mother thus emerge, in retrospect, as findable objects.

There is something vital at stake in the child's violent attempt to re-find his capacity to find things, and to keep alive rather than diminish his capacity for hope. Winnicott supports this fundamental intuition on the grounds that fantasies of subjective omnipotence underpin rather than inhibit our sense of reality. The waiting embodied in the defiant gesture contains an expectation of goodness that sustains us, but can never be satisfied. On these grounds, the child waits for the gift that the archaic, pre-object mother made available as primary love. The gift, which has as its first example 'the mother's arms or the mother's body' (Winnicott, 1956/1984, p. 125), announces and inaugurates the inner future and its symbolic substrate. Our belief in the future issues

from this vital relationship, but the latter doesn't lay the foundations for a future that will one day be present. We cannot realise the end of the future. Wishes may come true, in principle at least; but the gift of life exceeds the use that is made of it, and as such there will never be a present time of the inner future. Paradoxically, the possibility of the latter rests on the radical impossibility of its accomplishment. Once again, the gift of primary love 'makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible' (Derrida, 1967/1976, p. 143).

The enactment of hope

In this section, I want to extend my reflections on hope through a close reading of Anne Enright's (2015) novel *The Green Road*. The central character in the novel, Rosaleen Madigan, enjoys a 'life full of scraps, some of them beautiful' (p. 259). For the most part, however, we find her suspended in a vague but all-pervasive sense of futile expectancy. We might hear in Enright's phrase an allusion to Wallace Stevens' lines from 'Peter Quince at the Clavier': 'Beauty is momentary in the mind – / The fitful tracing of a portal; / But in the flesh it is immortal'. Leaving aside the immediate context of the poem, regarding Susanna's ablutions and the elders' desires, the stanza alerts us to a theme that lies at the heart of Enright's novel – namely, transience (the 'green going' of evenings as a figure of ageing) and its transcendent possibilities. Rosaleen has yet to reach this far within herself. Meanwhile, everything we learn about her character points to a secret wish that nothing will come of the waiting to which she nonetheless clings. Haunted by a life that she feels has eluded her, Rosaleen stands as a resigned witness to the irrevocable breakdown of her family: 'The world she grew up in was so different it was hard to believe she was ever in it. But she was in it, once. And she was here now' (p. 146).

Enright's character is, in many respects, in a hopeless situation, subject to a diminished capacity for love as well as a devitalised use of hope. Yet she continues to wait and refuses to let go of the thread of life. Crucially, she takes the abandonment of her four children into herself and identifies with the severance. At the same time, the sense of hopelessness that pervades much of the novel remains entangled with the 'hopeless' love the children feel for their mother: 'they all loved her now, they were hopeless in it' (p. 243). What does Enright mean by 'hopeless love'? Essentially, the phrase draws our attention to the despair that hangs like a permanent threat over this family of strays. No one in the novel is primarily concerned with the balance of love and loss, or with the work of mourning. Instead, a basic fault runs beneath the weight of grief, deeper and more disturbed than mourning, in Rosaleen's primordial sense of rootlessness. She no longer feels that she belongs to the place where she lives, and her sense of homelessness is paralleled by the wanderings, in Ireland and abroad, of her disinherited sons and daughters. The reclamation of hope thus depends on the sediment of experience deposited in the family memory, but also on the trace memories that go back even further, like the secret that Rosaleen's eldest son, Dan, 'had carried inside him; a map of things he had known and lost' (p. 203). Family witness, silent and inchoate as it may be, extends to historical and political witness in a family of internal migrants who 'had no traction in the world, no substance' (p. 240).

The novel begins in 1980, in County Clare, from which point the self-portrait of an Irish family unfolds through Enright's use of *style indirect libre*. Here, as elsewhere, it is the ordinary madness of everyday life that concerns Enright, a lived history at the interface of the domestic and the parochial rendered in impeccable realist prose. The children give the impression of a mother who was unable to cathect

their lives, whose love for them was deficient above all in lively attention. The novel is centrally concerned with this deficiency, with the extent to which the children's lives fragment for want of an attentive maternal presence at the beginning. In the course of the novel, an identifiable figure gradually emerges from this scattering of vagrant voices. Rosaleen's eldest son describes his mother as 'sequestered' (p. 32). Constance, in turn, detests the state of compensatory hope in which her mother 'never *did* anything', a blurred state of hope and regret in which this 'maddening woman' sacrificed the immediate demands of living (p. 251; emphasis in the original). Similarly, Emmet believes his mother saw to it that 'nothing happened' (p. 212) and, as a result, living in their family was like 'living in a hole in the ground' (p. 215). Most tellingly, the youngest child, Hanna, equates the 'weirdly empty' feel of the family house with her 'dead mother' (p. 32), notwithstanding the fact that Rosaleen is still living and breathing.

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The impression of psychic deadness extends from the children's perceptions, and their variously damaged adult lives, to the cadence of despair that marks their mother's inner narrative voice. Again, it is important that we don't confuse despair with loss, especially concerning Rosaleen's unlived life: 'It gave her a pang, just to catch the edge of it. An imagined life' (p. 146). What makes this situation all the more intolerable for the 'dead mother', but also for her children, is the fact that reminiscence – the recurrence of the 'old style' (with its echoes of Beckett's *Happy Days*) – becomes neither a settled lament nor an identifiable work of mourning. It isn't clear where to draw the line between past and present, real and imagined lives, or the living and the dead. The blurring of ghosts and voices makes it difficult for the reader to identify the manifestly dead in a family house that seems hardly alive. In

fact, Hanna, who assumes that their mother is simultaneously dead and alive, goes upstairs 'to tell her dead mother she was home' (p. 32).

Waiting is cast on unreliable ground by the paradox of the 'dead' mother; in fact, the child finds her mother bedridden, plunged into a state of withdrawal that warns of what is to come, an anticipation of the family's disappearance, silenced by mortality *and* history. Disinheritance is the overdetermined theme of the novel, which is played out as a drama of destruction and survival, particularly in the wake of the Famine and the history of dispossession. While it isn't an explicit theme, the fate of Northern Catholics after Partition also forms part of the unconscious fabric of the narrative. Similarly, the pivotal detail of 'hungry grass' recalls the time of the hunger strikes in Long Kesh, following the introduction of internment in 1971. I shall come back to hunger in a moment. Meanwhile, the various thematic threads, explicit and implicit, are pulled together when Rosaleen decides to sell the house, exposing the internally uprooted state of the family.

The theme of deracination is repeated in the very structure of the novel. Overshadowed by the 'great ruin' (p.162) of the dead father, the inscription of death at 'the edge' of perception haunts a work that interrupts itself through the episodic nature of the narrative. Moreover, the interruption works its way into the overall structure, comprising the journey out, and the journey back. The division of the novel along these lines may be seen in terms of the prospective-retrospective structure of hope, the twofold movement of destruction and survival. While the coupling of hope and exile has becoming a defining feature of our times, 'coming home' doesn't necessarily mean surviving. Homeward journeys for many migrant Irish workers are made in defeat and shame, as well as ill-health and old age, and there is certainly no question here of reparation or a blissful renewal. Nevertheless, I think the articulation

of hope and violence, in the name of the inner future, provides a strong reading of the novel, even as it involves the tragedy of waiting.

Clearly, the movement of the novel – leave-taking and homecoming – isn't confined to the literal facts of family migration, important though this is for placing the Madigans in the pattern of economic diaspora. The geographic montage of County Clare, New York, Mali and Dublin provides a contemporary backdrop for the deeper dislocations of hope and hopelessness that are worked out primarily through the fate of the central character, who, on the threshold of old age, fears that nothing connects with anything. The larger political realm is articulated by means of a particular literary tradition, in which, through recourse to a configuration that Enright (2016, p. 5) identifies in the work of William Trevor (the pre-eminent contemporary realist in Irish fiction), Rosaleen is brought to *the point of impossibility*. She 'had been waiting, all her life, for something that never happened' (Enright, 2015, p. 295) and could tolerate this abject state no longer. In desperation, she goes walking alone on a winter's night across the Burren, eventually clambering on her hands and knees in the dark.

The moment of hope, upon which I contend the novel turns, is presented on an elemental scale. Rosaleen's dark night takes shape through the central metaphor of the novel, 'the green road' of the title that crosses the uplands of the Burren on the west coast of Ireland. In addition to the unpaved track, Enright draws the reader's attention to the essential detail of the 'hungry grass'. The image is in accord with the *ethos* of the novel, and as such plays a pivotal role in affecting the crucial breaking in upon Rosaleen's claustration. It functions as a nodal point, gathering together infantile suffering, the act of hope, historical trauma and natural time. The associative chains run deep in the Irish imagination: in Irish mythology, 'hungry grass' (*féar gortach*) is

Commented [SS3]: Could you clarify this? Are you referring to the dispersed Irish? (Not clear what 'economic diaspora' as a phrase means by itself.)

Commented [SG4R3]: Yes, I am referring to the dispersed Irish – to clarify, may I suggest: '…the Madigans in the wider context of Irish dispersal and economic migration'. I don't think the reference to 'diaspora' is as important as the economic motive that often drives the process.

Commented [SS5]: Do you mean/could you say here 'dark night of the soul'?

Commented [SG6R5]: It is of course an allusion to the 'dark night of the soul' – perhaps I should spell it out. I would be happy with 'Rosaleen's "dark night of the soul" takes shape…' if you think it helps.

the name given to a patch of cursed grass, which, as Rosaleen knows, sometimes grows ‘on a grave where no priest came to say prayers’, or else ‘on the threshold of a house where all the people died, with no one left to bury them, and the house fell into ruin after’ (p. 278). In the association with a corpse that hasn’t been given absolution, the curse condemns anyone who walks on the grass to a permanent and insatiable state of hunger.

Further to the myth, this ‘hunger’ is rooted historically and politically in the collective memory; in particular, the myth of ‘hungry grass’ has become associated with the Famine of 1845-1852. A sobering sight, as anyone who has been in this part of the world will testify, Famine houses – stone cottages deserted during the Famine – can be found everywhere in the west of Ireland. Rosaleen, during her dark night, finds herself before such a haunted, dispossessed place – indeed, with hungry grass in front of the ruined doorway. Her reckoning is articulated against this historical background, a scene which also alludes to Wordsworth’s ‘poor hut / Sunk to decay’ in ‘The Ruined Cottage’ (1799/2014, pp. 935-6). Indeed, Enright is no less indebted than Seamus Heaney to the dominant English poetic tradition of Wordsworth. Thus, in a further association that allegorises the dilemma of Irish literature in English, the infant’s hunger pains may be seen as the prototype of the blank pain of despair. A stark decision presents itself to Rosaleen, who would no longer be exposed to the elements once she was across the hungry grass; and yet, according to the curse, after crossing the grass, she would remain hungry forever.

Handed down to the children’s ‘dead mother’ by an irreducible complication of family, history, myth and memory, the curse brings the question of the future sharply into focus. The liberty of myth cannot be fended off at the heart of the family, nor simply replaced by historical time. But while history isn’t the only outcome at

stake, unburdening herself of the supernatural powers of the curse is nonetheless the trial that faces Rosaleen now that she is on 'the green road'. In the event, she crosses the threshold of the ruined cottage; she steps back into the historical past of Irish graves and, at the same time, undoes the knots of superstition and confinement, even as she confronts the authority of the dead father. She doesn't cross over into a changed world so much as reenvisage the future through a different sense of the past.

The metaphor of 'the green road' locates the decisive action of the novel *on the threshold*, or in the gap, which is where things remain at the end. Meanwhile, Enright roots the transition in the individual immediacies of Rosaleen's life: the step back allows her to put the feelings of despair behind her and to lay her husband's ghost to rest ('There was no such thing as hungry grass. And Pat Madigan was long dead') (p. 280). Hopelessness is revealed here as a kind of blank pain; crawling along the unpaved track on all fours, Rosaleen had put the question to herself of what happens when the person you love is gone: 'A part of his body inside your own body…What happened when all that was in the earth, deep down in the cemetery clay? Nothing happened. That is what happened' (p. 266).

The step back constitutes a re-valuation of the value of the future, which bestows new meaning on the phrase 'nothing happened'. Compounded by the children's symptomatic complaint that their mother saw to it that nothing happened, Rosaleen's disavowal of grief may be seen as the re-enactment of a defence against the archaic pains of hunger, or the infantile want of love. Paradoxically, the silence of the grave gives word to a yet more primordial dispossession that threatens to cast Rosaleen and her children outside of their own history. The re-configuration of national and cross-channel relationships in Ireland, from the 1980s onwards, is the more immediate background against which Enright describes the family's experience

of being uprooted and culturally eliminated. Furthermore, the novel shows how the deep-seated disinheritance had been split off in Rosaleen through a chronic lack of attention, resulting in a profound state of depersonalisation that is revealed by an allusion to Macbeth's 'borrowed robes' (Shakespeare, 1987a, p. 1311): 'It was as though she was wearing someone else's coat, one that was the same as hers…but it wasn't her coat, she could tell it wasn't. It just looked the same' (p. 165).

Living all along in the 'wrong house' (p.165), Rosaleen had found nothing in the pattern of her life, nothing that she could rely on in a meaningful way. The impersonation provides a cover for the desolation, until she wakes finally, with a start, to the sound of laboured breathing. She hears a cow eating 'mouthfuls of midnight grass' (p. 280) outside the cottage, the sound of which proves essentially hopeful in restoring the lapse of time and calling the old woman back to the unfolding of human temporality. Enright places the temporal restoration with characteristic precision. Historically, the Burren was in fact a good place to fatten cattle on winter grass and, in these auditory representations of sexual intercourse and child birth, the condensation of bodies and ground announces and inaugurates a new beginning.

Perceived by Emmet as a change in his mother's 'mood' (p. 292), the reclamation of primal ground takes the form of an affirmation. The perversion of hope, the unfounded but tenacious belief that 'nothing happens', gives way to the possible impossibility of the findable object. By the end of the novel, Rosaleen assumes the penances imposed on her: on the one hand, the astonishment with which she awoke 'lasted a long time in her blood' (p. 280); on the other, grass may be seen, finally, as a synonym for the ground on which life and death are admitted, although not as finished, separate states. An atonement of sorts follows in Rosaleen's

penitential admission that, for the sake of the future, she should have 'paid more attention to things' (p. 310).

Conclusion

I have set out in this paper what seems to me a viable framework for a general theory of hope. While allowing for the clinical and cultural phenomenon of perverse hope – the omnipotent narcissistic fantasy that nothing will come of waiting even as one waits – at the same time, I have proposed a more positive evaluation of hope as the doing of a certain kind of action. My main conclusion is that, further to the devitalised illusions of self-destructive waiting, the hope that comes with the inaugural gift of love enacts a belief in the (inner) future. Taking Balint's notions of 'primary love' and 'therapeutic regression' as a starting point, I have linked the idea of a 'new beginning' – one that doesn't cease to be one – with Winnicott's account of the 'moment of hope' and of the destruction-survival of the object. Stoicism is not the only, or the most vital, option available to us; nor does resignation describe the whole of our attitude towards reality. I have identified defiance as a further option, with respect to the possibilities that present themselves in the gap between the underlying conviction that 'something is available' and the unconscious assumption that 'something is missing' (lost or damaged). Defiance embodies hopeful waiting in terms of a possible new beginning ('I begin here again', Walcott, 1973, p. 145), without necessarily denying the terrible things that may have happened. This, I think, applies even to the worst that can happen, which doesn't necessarily make a future impossible. Hope remains the enactment of its own possibility – 'Each one demand and answer to his part / Performed in this wide gap of time…' (Shakespeare, 1987b, p. 916).

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